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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 002086

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA - INTERPARTY DIALOGUE IMMINENT ON CODE OF CONDUCT FOR ELECTIONS

Classified By: ADCM Michael Gonzales for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) In early August Prime Minister Meles formally considered sample codes of conduct suggested by the Ethiopian Partner's Group (EPG) of Ambassadors. Through the mediation of the EPG, via the British Embassy, the EPRDF has invited major opposition parties to engage in negotiations about a code of conduct for use in the May 2010 elections. On August 21, the EPRDF issued a formal invitation to the Forum for Democratic Dialogue and two other opposition parties to meet.

The Forum has agreed to meet the ruling party on August 31 to begin discussions of the code of conduct. We expect that opposition party members will come to these negotiations with significant skepticism. Opposition leaders have told us that even if there is agreement on the text of a Code of Conduct which represents their interests on paper, they do not have any confidence the ruling party will apply it during the elections. While these direct interparty talks -- the first in over three years -- certainly represent a positive step and an opportunity for parties to directly express their frustrations, the ruling party's continued harassment and intimidation of opposition parties and supporters does not build our confidence that they are committed to leveling the electoral playing field. End Summary.

EPG Suggests Codes of Conduct

¶12. (SBU) In late July the Ethiopian Partner's Group (EPG) submitted a letter to the EPRDF suggesting the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) consider several codes of conduct for use in the 2010 elections. On August 2 British Ambassador Norman Ling briefed a small group from the EPG -- namely the U.S., UK, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and Norway -- that Prime Minister Meles had read all of the codes of conduct presented to him, and decided that he favored the South African code and the code of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), based in Stockholm. Meles wanted to create interparty committees to discuss or modify the codes, create verification mechanisms for infringements of the code, have sanctions for such infringement, and finally, have a final code of conduct legislated by the Parliament on a very ambitious schedule, hopefully as early as October.

¶13. (SBU) During late July and early August the British Ambassador and Charge d'Affaires led a series of discreet "shuttle negotiations" between Prime Minister Meles' point people on the Code of Conduct issue - Bereket Simon of the Government Communication Affairs Office and EPRDF Election's Committee; Muktar Kadir, the Head of the EPRDF Secretariat;

and Hailemariam Dessalegn, Chief Whip for the EPRDF -- and the leadership of the Forum for Democratic Dialogue, the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP), and the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP). The purpose of these "negotiations" was to pave the way for a formal invitation from the EPRDF to the opposition parties to come to the table to discuss the codes of conduct and to make suggestions on the part of the EPG about the modalities of such discussions. Some of the concerns of the parties were that the discussions be facilitated by a neutral party, who would chair the session, that the opposition parties be given adequate time to prepare for the dialogues, how the results would be conveyed to the media, and whether observers would be permitted, among other issues.

EPRDF Rushes to Engage Opposition

¶4. (SBU) On August 21, the EPRDF sent an invitation to the Forum as well as to Lidetu Ayelu's EDP party and Hailu Shawel's AEUP to join the EPRDF on August 22 or 24 to begin discussions on the Code of Conduct. The Forum convened quickly and met until late on the 21st, but preferred to coordinate internally before jumping at discussions the next morning. Forum leadership communicated directly to the EPRDF the desire for talks to begin on August 31. This delay of one week will give the Forum time to hold a communal meeting on August 28, as well as hold meetings in the south over the weekend.

¶5. (C) On August 27, Gavin Cook, Second Secretary at the British Embassy updated Deputy Political/Economic Counselor

ADDIS ABAB 00002086 002 OF 002

on his conversations with Forum leadership on their efforts to finalize a letter to the EPRDF laying out issues that should be on the agenda for the initial August 31 discussions of the code of conduct. The Forum members have agreed to speak with "one voice," and to convey to the EPRDF the opposition's wish for other issues (in addition to the code of conduct) to be open for discussion. They told Cook these issues will be presented in a "catch-all and generic way" that will not threaten to derail the dialogue. The letter, which they hope to deliver to the EPRDF on August 28, will agree to begin meetings on August 31 with discussions of "modalities" of the code of conduct meetings.

¶6. (C) Cook noted that he received a separate call from Hailu Shawel's AEUP party asking whether the EPG community might consider providing a facilitator for the negotiations from within its ranks. Cook responded that the EPG had discussed the EPRDF's invitation to EPG members to participate as "silent and impartial observers," but that the group had not contemplated providing a facilitator. Privately, he admitted to P/E Deputy that he and his colleagues felt provision of a facilitator from within the EPG community would be a poor decision given that it would provide a scapegoat if the negotiations failed to produce a positive result, a sentiment that we share.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) The opposition parties have been seeking a forum for dialogue with the ruling party for the past three years, an issue that we have also pushed. While the May 2010 elections are certainly looming, the EPRDF's request for the Forum to come to the negotiating table with one day's notice was unrealistic. Forum members have noted that they will come to these discussions with quite a bit of skepticism. Conversations with opposition leaders in recent weeks have revealed that even if they can hammer out a Code of Conduct which they feel represents their interests on paper, they do not have any confidence the ruling party will apply it during the elections. One particular worry that several have expressed is that if the code is not implemented or enforced, opposition parties may again opt to boycott the elections rather than endorse a clearly manipulated process. If

Parliament invokes a Code of Conduct into law which requires political parties to participate in elections, the law could be used to shut down and deregister parties who do boycott. While these direct interparty talks -- the first in over three years -- certainly represent a positive step and an opportunity for parties to directly express their frustrations, the ruling party's continued harassment and intimidation of opposition parties and supporters does not build our confidence that they are committed to leveling the electoral playing field. End Comment.

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